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British Abolitionism and Feminism in Transatlantic and Imperial Perspective

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Introduction

This paper seeks to throw new light on the link between abolitionism and feminism by examining the British link from two perspectives, the transatlantic and the imperial. It is divided into three parts. In the first, I survey the historiography of female abolitionism and its link to feminism from a transatlantic perspective, and then outline an alternative imperial context within which to place the link between the two movements in Britain. The second section of the paper focuses on the use of the woman-slavery analogy in the differing national contexts of Britain and America. Finally, I discuss 'race' and the problem of defining feminism, discussing the implications of shifting my analytical framework from 'abolitionist-feminism' to 'female abolitionism as feminism'.

The link between abolitionism and feminism in transatlantic and imperial perspectives

In 1887, American women's suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton asserted in the *History of Women's Suffrage* that the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 had given rise to the movement for women's political equality both in England and the United States. [see Midgley, 1992, note 24 p.249]. In the US the strong link between abolitionism and feminism was acknowledged from the beginnings of the new wave of historical scholarship which accompanied the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and 70s. However, in Britain the link between abolitionism and feminism, acknowledged by feminist Josephine Butler in the 1870s when she labeled her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act the 'new abolition' movement, was ignored in feminist scholarship until Jane Rendall, in her 1983 study of *The Origins of Modern Feminism*, echoed Stanton in asserting that 'the anti-slavery campaign was a highly significant one for the emergence of women in public life in both Britain and the United States' (p.247). Her analysis of the British link was, however, hampered, as she acknowledged, by the lack of studies of women's contributions to anti-slavery in Britain, a situation which contrasted with the body of scholarship already existing in the US (Lerner, 1967; Lutz, 1968, Hersch, 1978).

This gap in scholarship on British women anti-slavery campaigners began to be filled with the publication in 1985 of a pioneering article by Louis and Rosamund Billington, which also specifically addressed the relationship between anti-slavery and feminism. Black women's contribution to British anti-slavery discourse was also acknowledged for the first time, with Moira Ferguson's introduction to a new edition of *The History of Mary Prince*, which re-located the text out of the American slave narratives with which it

had customarily been placed back into its Caribbean and Britain contexts. It was at this juncture that I embarked on a PhD thesis on women anti-slavery campaigners in Britain, work which formed the basis of my 1992 book *Women Against Slavery* and an article on anti-slavery and feminism published the following year in *Gender and History*.

Thus, by the early 1990s The relationship between anti-slavery and feminism in Britain was much better understood and could be integrated into general histories of feminism (eg Barbara Caine, *English Feminism 1780-1980* (1997)). It also became possible to make a more balanced evaluation of the similarities and differences in the relationship in Britain and the US, as in Christine Bolt's comparative study of transatlantic feminism,

Movements in the United States and Britain from the 1790s to the 1920s
(1993).

In 1992, after my study of British women's involvement in the anti-slavery movement was published, I contemplated undertaking a comparative study of British and American women abolitionists which would draw out their strong transatlantic links and cross-influences and the similarities and differences in their ideas and actions. This project would, I felt, also be one way of further exploring a question which was of central interest to me: the way in which white women's campaigns around the oppression of women seen as racially and or culturally 'other' influenced the early development of modern western feminism. There was a developing new body of literature on which to draw here. Moira Ferguson's *Subject to Others* (1992) suggested the value of literary analysis for the study of British abolitionism and feminism, highlighting the significance

of the woman-slave analogy to British women writers, although I felt unconvinced by some of her interpretations of the material. In addition, Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale* (1992) set out a richly suggestive framework for study, linking past to present and including material on both the US and Britain, but in its breadth of coverage inevitably lacked depth of historical contextualisation.

Work on American women abolitionists was also becoming more sophisticated, offering new ways of approaching the British material and providing a richer basis for comparative work. Jean Fagan Yellin's *Women and Sisters* (1989) focussed on the iconography of the movement to explore the place of abolitionist feminism in American culture, moving beyond the biographical approach of earlier studies. Literary scholars also offered new insights: Karen Sanchez-Eppler's *Touching Liberty* (1993) drew on a variety of literary and political texts to explore the place of the raced and gendered body in the intersecting rhetorics of abolitionism and feminism. The exclusions of white feminist scholarship itself were addressed by Shirley Yee's study of *Black Women Abolitionists* (1992). Study of American abolitionist feminists was also facilitated by the production of a steady stream of edited collections of documents, most recently by Kathryn Kish Sklar (2000). Unfortunately, similar published collections on British women anti-slavery campaigners are still lacking, though women's pivotal role in the transatlantic network of abolitionists is highlighted in Clare Taylor's valuable collection of letters between British and American abolitionists.

I did not, in the end elect to undertake such a full-length transatlantic and comparative study, partly because I felt I lacked sufficient grounding in American history to do it justice. Nobody else has yet taken on the challenge, and this reflects the way feminist historical scholarship has tended to remain within the straightjacket of national frameworks. Leila Rupp's valuable study of international women's organisations focusses on the period after 1880s, while Margaret McFadden's *Golden Cables of Sympathy* (1999), although it does highlight the importance of women abolitionists in developing transatlantic networks which laid the ground for this groups, is a narrative overview that offers limited new interpretive insights. Similarly, non-one has yet produced a study of black women to complement Paul Gilroy's highly influential but male-focussed study, *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

For myself, an alternative to a comparative transatlantic study presented itself, and this was the direction I elected to pursue. I was keen to relate my work on British women and anti-slavery to an emerging body of critical feminist scholarship on western women and imperialism (Strobel, 1991; Chaudhuri and Strobel, 1991). Organising a strand on gender and imperialism at the Anglo-American conference in London in 1994, and publication that same year of Antoinette Burton's *Burdens of History*, opened my eyes to the fascinating new scholarship in this field. However, the focus of Burton's book, and indeed of the bulk of such scholarship was on the period after 1860. I wished to trace Burton's story of the link between imperialism and feminism back beyond of the 'first wave' organised women's movement in Britain of the 1860s to 1914 to the period described by Jane Rendall as seeing the origins of modern feminism, the 1790s to 1850s.

This is the project I am now in the midst of. I am seeking to examine the extent to which Britain's role as an imperial nation impacted on the framing of arguments in early feminist tracts from Wollstonecraft to Mill. I am exploring the nature and significance of British women's involvement in a range of philanthropic and reformist endeavours on the imperial stage. This has provided an opportunity to place women's anti-slavery work alongside their involvement in the campaign against *sati* or widow burning, in British India, and their engagement with projects for the Christian education of colonised women. I am also exploring the nature of female oppression and the meaning of female emancipation in the discourse of these campaigners, throwing new light on the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism by adding an imperial dimension to the scholarly debate.

I would thus like to suggest that the relationship between anti-slavery and feminism in Britain can be looked at from two complementary perspectives: the transatlantic and the imperial. Rather than seeing these as two discrete or opposed approaches, I hope in this paper to use both. Drawing on existing studies, one can pinpoint a number of key aspects of the link between abolitionism and feminism which warrant further exploration from these perspectives. These include: the woman-slave analogy in feminist discourse; women abolitionists' rhetoric of sisterhood; the link between abolitionism and the emergence of an organised movement for women's rights; the role of transatlantic connections and influences in linking abolitionism to feminism; the differences in strength, form and timing in the link between abolitionism and feminism in Britain and the US; and, running through all the above, the ways in which the politics of 'race'

inflected the relationships between white and black women campaigners, and affected the link made between abolitionism and feminism

In the remainder of this paper I will touch on all these areas in addressing two aspects of the abolition – feminism link on which I think a combined comparative transatlantic and British imperial perspective can offer new insights. These are, first, the use of the woman-slave analogy in differing national contexts, and secondly, ‘race’ and the question of whether female anti-slavery is intrinsically feminist.

The woman-slave analogy in differing national contexts

In the United States, some American women – those linked to the radical Garrisonian wing of the abolitionist movement - combined advocacy of the rights of enslaved women with assertion of their own rights to speak at meetings and participate fully in decision-making within the anti-slavery movement. They also developed what has been labeled an ‘abolitionist-feminist’ discourse that equated sexual and racial bondage. In contrast, women anti-slavery campaigners in Britain, even those who allied themselves to the Garrisonians, were reluctant to raise the issue of their own rights within the movement, and avoided attempting to discursively yoke together abolitionism and feminism. Instead, their anti-slavery rhetoric rested on assertions of their own privileges as women, and the desire to extend these privileges to others.

The reasons British and American women abolitionists adopted differing practical approaches and rhetorical strategies are to be sought in the broader differences in the place of slavery and anti-slavery in the body politic, and the differing intersections between the politics of 'race', class and gender in the two nations. Let me sketch out a few areas that warrant further exploration around this question.

Bolt attributes the fact that British women abolitionists did not insistently equate sexual and racial bondage partly to the fact that they were 'geographically far removed from slavery' (p.43) This explanation, while seeming to state the obvious, perhaps obscures more than it illuminates. One of British women campaigners' main objectives was to bring home the issue of slavery to the British public – to demonstrate that the slave system was not a remote issue, but a national evil which they were intimately implicated in upholding through their consumption of slave-grown sugar (OHP image: 'the negro mother's appeal'). On the American side, most women abolitionists were themselves geographically removed from slavery, and few had personally witnessed the slave system (though the Grimke sisters and black women abolitionists who had escaped slavery, such as Sojourner Truth and Ellen Craft, are of course significant exceptions). It is more illuminating to reframe the difference in political terms (as indeed Bolt herself suggests, though only with reference to the US). In the US race and gender were the two key determinants of full citizenship, at least once white working men had gained the vote over the 1812-1840 period. As Sanchez-Eppler's points out, a disembodied 'person' was accorded rights in the American constitution, but the raced and gendered bodies of black and women were excluded from this supposedly universalist notion of personhood: it was

to this that abolitionist-feminist drew attention. This contrasts to the situation in Britain, where class was the key determinant of enfranchisement, with socio-economic position in terms of property ownership the key, and where race-based slavery was largely a colonial problem, legitimated and framed by laws distinct from those operating within Britain. While the 1832 Reform Act introduced sex as a determinant of enfranchisement for the first time - when the word 'person' in the wording of the Act was ruled to refer only to men - this was swiftly followed by the Emancipation Act. The possibility for the development of an equation between the position of women and of slaves within the political nation was thus closed down at just the time when it was opening up with the US. In sum, then, equating the position of women and slaves had less political salience in Britain than the US.

The greater salience of class than race in British politics may also have impacted in other ways on the shape of the anti-slavery movement in the two nations. The middle-class activists who dominated the British anti-slavery movement, even those men and women with the most radical politics, attempted to keep anti-slavery a single-issue campaign. In contrast the Garrisonian wing of the American movement was characterised by its willingness to embrace a wide platform of moral reform. This difference may in part relate to broad differences in the organisation of pressure group politics in the two nations. However, there is evidence that it was also the result of fears among the middle-class men who led the anti-slavery movement that working-class Chartists would hijack it for their own ends. In the 1840s anti-slavery meetings were disrupted by Chartist men and women seeking to promote the rights of 'white slaves' and criticising

middle-class philanthropists for paying more attention to suffering abroad than suffering at home. The fraught politics of class in Britain perhaps also impeded radicalisation of the movement along gender lines

The absence of a substantial free black presence in Britain, in contrast to the northern states of the US, also had an impact on the nature of women's involvement in the movement. In Britain, at least between the mid 1820s and early 1850s, anti-slavery was seen a respectable form of humanitarian philanthropy, representative of the views of the moderate majority. In contrast, women abolitionists in the US had to confront widespread white hostility to anti-slavery linked to racism: racist attacks were directed against anti-slavery activists, especially at those who challenged racial segregation alongside their opposition to slavery: association between white women and black men in the movement aroused particular hostility. The willingness of American women in the 1830s and 1840s to challenge 'separate spheres' ideology perhaps related to the embattled position of abolitionists in the United States: women like Angelina Grimke, having broken racial taboos, were perhaps more willing to break sexual ones. The contribution of free black women to the American movement was also highly significant in pushing it in more radical directions: African-American women were pioneers in combining anti-slavery with assertion of their own rights both as women and as blacks. Indeed, at a later stage they also had an impact on radicalising the British movement: while in 1832 Maria W. Stewart became was first woman to lecture publicly against slavery in US, in 1859 Sarah Paker Remond became the first woman to do so in Britain.

Transatlantic comparison thus helps to illuminate the reasons why British women abolitionists were more reluctant than their American sisters to combine anti-slavery and women's rights or to make analogies between their position and that of slaves. However, placing British women anti-slavery campaigners' activities in an imperial context helps to illuminate why they did not simply avoid the American abolitionist-feminist approach but rather adopted the opposite approach. This involved stressing their own privileges and their desire to extend these to women suffering under slavery.

My recent research suggests that this approach by British women abolitionists was part of a wider approach adopted by women who became involved in a range of early nineteenth century campaigns aimed at improving the position of women in different parts of the Empire. Such imperial female philanthropy and reform expanded evangelical promotion of 'women's mission to women' from the domestic arena onto the imperial stage. The anti-slavery rhetoric of female privilege versus female degradation very closely echoes the rhetoric of British women engaged in the campaign against *sati* – widow- burning – in India. It also echoes the language of women concerned to promote the Christian education of 'heathen' women as their distinctive contribution to the foreign missionary enterprise that took off from the 1790s onwards.

In female imperial philanthropy the emancipation of women was seen as achievable through a combination of legal reform and the spread of Christianity in order to eradicate barbaric practices and thus bring to non-European women the privileges supposedly enjoyed by women in the Christian west. The difference was that whereas anti-slavery

was concerned with oppression by European men, anti-sati was concerned with oppression by non-European men. Thus *sati* was presented as a striking reflection of the degraded and superstitious nature of Hindu society, whereas the treatment of women under colonial slavery was presented as a horrific anomaly ‘in Countries which acknowledge British Laws, which are governed, not by some half-wild, benighted native Race’ but by Christian men ‘connected with us by the closest ties’, (Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, p. 99)

All this does not mean that British women never made use of the analogy between women and slaves. Rather, female abolitionist discourse, trapped in an assertion of white female privilege, developed along a separate trajectory to discourse promoting the rights of white British women. The latter did indeed draw on the woman-slave analogy.

If we examine the woman-slavery analogy which is a recurrent motifs in early British feminist tracts, however, we find it does not precisely mirror the use of the analogy by American abolitionist feminists. To fully understand British feminists’ use of this analogy we need to appreciate its imperial context as well as its transatlantic parallels. This discourse developed in the context of Britain’s imperial expansion and indeed, contributed to the development of what post-colonial theorists have labeled ‘orientalism’ or, more broadly, ‘colonial discourse’. When British advocates of women’s rights, from Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft in the 1790s to Taylor and Mill in the 1850s-60s, compare the position of British women to slaves they are referring on some occasions to African slaves in British colonies or the US, on others to women enslaved in

the 'despotic' 'oriental' harem, and on others to the ill-treatment of women in 'savage' societies. In other words, this is not, as Moira Ferguson has suggested, a univocal white woman-black male slave analogy, but rather what I have labeled a 'triple discourse' of slavery. This drew on Enlightenment discourse which, developing in tandem with European overseas exploration and expansion, used the position of women as marker of level of civilisation in a particular society. In drawing on, developing and critiquing Enlightenment thought these early British feminists positioned the emancipation of women as the culmination of the progress of western civilisation, and presented the oppression of women, like the enslavement of Africans, as out of place and out of time in developed western society.

In Britain, then, women anti-slavery campaigners and women campaigning against *sati* and for missionary education presented their own position as a privileged one which they hoped to enable colonised women to attain. Simultaneously, advocates of British women's rights stressed their current slave status, drawing analogies not only with enslaved Africans but also with women living in supposedly less civilised lands. This separation of abolitionist and feminist discourse and campaigning contrasted with American abolitionist- feminism. American bringing together of two emancipatory movements does not have a parallel in Britain until the 1860s, when, as Antoinette Burton has shown, British feminists began to argue that they should be granted the vote in the metropolis so that they could take the lead in improving the position of women in the Empire, thus yoking together their role as imperial reformers with their suffrage campaigning.

'Race' and definitions of feminism: abolitionist-feminism or female abolitionism as feminism?

The question of the relationship between abolitionism and feminism had traditionally been posed in terms of the use of the white woman-black slave analogy in abolitionist-feminist and feminist discourse, as discussed above, and in terms of the relationship between anti-slavery organisation and the emergence of an organised women's movement. The differing relationship between the two movements on opposite sides of the Atlantic was summed up by Christine Bolt in 1993, and the picture she presents is, I think, still widely held. In essence, it is that in the US anti-slavery was the most important force impelling women towards feminist organisation in the 1830s and 40s, and the question of women's rights was a key area of debate and division in the abolition movement. In contrast, in Britain, although organised female anti-slavery activity emerged earlier, women abolitionists did not agitate for equal rights within the movement, and only moved into feminism with the winding down of the freedmen's aid movement in the late 1860s.

Implicit in this account of differing chronologies of development from anti-slavery to feminism is the assumption that anti-slavery campaigning on behalf of black women was not in itself feminist, and that only when white women campaigned around their own oppression can it be labeled feminist. The approach also ignores the significance of black

women's contributions to anti-slavery and the possible link of this to the emergence of a specifically black feminism. Indeed Bolt herself explicitly elected to exclude women of colour from her account of the development of the women's movement in the United States and Britain on the grounds that their activities 'warrant a separate treatment, in recognition of the equal significance of race and gender for such women'. (Bolt, 1993, p.11) Despite her own path-breaking work around questions of race and racism, I think Bolt here misses a crucial opportunity to re-view definitions of feminism through the lens of 'race'. There continues to be a tendency in historical studies of feminism to take white (and middle-class) western women's campaigns as the feminist norm, and see black (and working-class) women's activism as somehow not feminist because it did not focus 'purely' on gender but also encompassed issues of race (or class). In asking whether female abolitionism was intrinsically feminist, I hope to contribute to formulating a more inclusive definition of feminism, one which encompasses the diversity of female oppression and the range of ways women have sought to emancipate themselves. Such a definition opens up space to study of the ways women have made connections with women defined as 'other', and to confront the racism and Eurocentrism present in the roots of white western feminism.

There are a number of indicators to suggest that, in focusing on the oppression of enslaved black women and campaigning for their emancipation, women abolitionists were indeed engaged in an intrinsically feminist campaign. First, women abolitionists developed an analysis of the sexual and well as racial exploitation and oppression of enslaved women. Second, they campaigned for the emancipation of enslaved women

from the bonds of this slavery defined in sexual as well as racial terms. Third, they developed a rhetoric of sisterhood that articulated a sense of empathy and identification with other women, and provided the basis for collective female organisation against slavery. Let us look at each of these aspects of female abolitionism in a bit more detail.

First, women abolitionists sought to draw attention to the specific sufferings of black women under slavery, showing that it was a system of sexual as well as racial exploitation and oppression. They highlighted the widespread violence against women by male planters and overseers, expressing particular horror at the flogging of pregnant women and the stripping of women for punishment. They made constant references to the 'degradation' of women by slavery, though codes of respectability dictated that they could only make such veiled references to black women's rape and sexual exploitation by white men. They also lamented the destruction of family life under the slave system, focusing particularly on the way children were torn from their mothers and sold away from them, and how women were forced to work even when their children were sick and needed their care. (OHP IMAGES) This analysis of female oppression under slavery differed from feminist analysis of the oppression white women, focussing as it did on the institution of slavery and planter's treatment of their female slaves rather than the institution of marriage and men's treatment of their wives. However, it shared a feminist analysis of sexual exploitation and oppression, male violence, and women's lack of rights over their own bodies. Here we can see a diversity of feminist analysis developing in response to a diversity of female experience. African-American women abolitionists, in particular, developed a black feminism or 'womanism' which comprised three

inseparable components: opposition to slavery; attacks on racism; and recognition of the particular sufferings of women under slavery. Sarah Parker Remond brought this analysis powerfully to the attention of the British public during her anti-slavery lecture tours of Britain in 1859-61, stressing how their slave status made the suffering of black women far worse than that of the English seamstresses, whose plight was the subject of much philanthropic concern at this period.

Secondly, women abolitionists aimed to emancipate women from these forms of sexual as well as racial oppression. Can this emancipatory objective be seen as intrinsically feminist? Certainly, in so far as it involved a discourse of women's rights: enslaved women had a right to freedom. It also involved a discourse of female emancipation which presented a vision of what that freedom should mean. It is when we look at this vision of emancipation that doubts about labeling female abolitionism 'feminist' surface. For British women expressed their desire to emancipate enslaved women so that they were free to fulfil their domestic roles and duties as wives and mothers, living as Christians in nuclear families under the protection of their husbands. This was what they meant when they talked of extending their privileges as British women to enslaved women. Their radical vision of women's rights thus combined with a rather conservative vision of female emancipation. This dualism can be linked to a tension at the heart of the British anti-slavery movement between, on the one hand, the political radicalism of Thomas Clarkson and supporters of the 'Rights of Man', and, on the other, the political conservatism of William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect Evangelicals.

A very similar domestic-focused vision of female emancipation to that presented by female abolitionists was articulated by evangelical men and women involved in the anti-*sati* and female missionary education movements. Here we encounter the problem of defining feminism historically: are we to impose our contemporary definitions or are we to take the language of female emancipation at face value and see such visions as a variety of feminism? This ties in to a wider debate about the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism: are we to see Hannah More and her sisters as anti-feminists because they opposed Mary Wollstonecraft's call for women's rights and instead stressed women's social subordination to men and their domestic duties? Or should we interpret such evangelical women as conservative feminists because they asserted women's spiritual equality and elevated women as moral guardians of the nation both through their domestic roles as the educators of children and moral advisers of husbands, and in their wider roles as philanthropists and moral reformers? Clearly, there were a variety of contested views as to what female emancipation entailed in early nineteenth century.

There is another difficulty in describing female anti-slavery's vision of freedom as feminist. It is that the people articulating this were free, mainly white, women speaking on behalf of enslaved women rather than enslaved women expressing their own views or using abolitionists as their mouthpieces. Obviously, this was partly the inevitable outcome of the slave system, which ruthlessly suppressed black self-expression. But in Britain, even when the opportunity to consult a black woman who had experienced slavery arose, as in the case of Mary Prince, it was not fully taken. Prince was seen by

white abolitionist women as a victim of slavery who could contribute to the movement by telling her own tale of suffering. However, although she publicly presented herself as a representative of colonial slaves and called for their emancipation, she was never accepted as an anti-slavery campaigner by white women, probably because of her lack of formal education and her class position as servant in an abolitionist household. An opportunity to find out what African-Caribbean women wanted out of emancipation was thus lost. British women abolitionists thus developed a vision of freedom which, unchecked against the wishes of enslaved women themselves, influenced the shaping of post-emancipation policy in the Caribbean in ways which reflected what white women thought would be good for black women rather than what they themselves desired. The situation was obviously different in the United States, where both fugitive slaves and free blacks played an important part in the abolitionist movement, but here racism and racial segregation impeded the development of a movement centred around the agendas of black activists. That important component of feminism which encompasses female autonomy and self-definition thus seems to be wholly or partially absent from female anti-slavery.

The third element we need to examine in exploring whether female anti-slavery was intrinsically feminist is the use of the rhetoric of sisterhood in the movement. The motto 'Am I not a woman and a sister' became a rallying cry for female anti-slavery, first in Britain and then in the United States. The prime function of the motto was an assertion of sisterhood between free white women and enslaved black women. The question – the 'yes' answer implied by the lack of question mark - drew attention not only to shared

humanity but also to shared femaleness. This was articulated particularly around women's shared experience of motherhood, which was seen as transcending any possible racial or cultural difference: the assumption was that black women felt for their children as strongly as white women. This egalitarian aspect of anti-slavery rhetoric had its roots in British radicalism of the 1790s and the rhetoric of the 'rights of

However, the egalitarianism of the motto was undercut by its association with an image of a kneeling, enchained, praying enslaved woman, making it an appeal to be recognised as equal rather than an assertion of equality ('I am a woman and a sister'). Indeed the image stressed present inequality caused by slavery rather than presenting a vision of emancipation and empowerment. The white woman viewer of the image is addressed as the one with the gift of freedom to give, with enslaved women's resistance rendered invisible. Thus the rhetoric of sisterhood was coupled with a maternalistic approach – white women spoke for black women and offered them protection. The presentation of black women as passive victims is inseparable from the empowerment of white women in this imagery. One way to interpret this is to say that the feminism of the motto was undercut by the imagery. Another, and I would argue a more insightful interpretation, is that this is an instance of a white feminist agenda being pursued at the expense of black women even while claiming to promote their interests. Such maternalism fits with the more conservative, evangelical strand in anti-slavery, which also surfaces in the approach by middle-class white women involved in both domestic and imperial philanthropy.

The rhetoric of sisterhood, in providing a common focus around which female abolitionists could mobilise, also fostered female anti-slavery organisation. Indeed 'am I not a woman as a sister' as motto and image was brought into circulation by the first female anti-slavery society in Britain in the 1820s, then exported to America when women began to organise anti-slavery societies there in the 1830s. In the Atlantic world of transatlantic reform the rhetoric of sisterhood was also mobilised to foster co-operation among female abolitionists across national boundaries. But, just as in female anti-slavery discourse there was a tension between egalitarian and maternalist strands of feminism, so in female anti-slavery organisation there was a tension between inclusivity and exclusivity. In Britain female anti-slavery societies were run by middle-class women and working-class women were not recruited to committees though they were encouraged to support the movement through donations, signatures to petitions and participation in the boycott of slave produce. In the US some white women were unwilling to accept black women within their groups, and many were reluctant to tackle the evils of racial segregation alongside the evils of slavery. The transatlantic anti-slavery sisterhood, while including some leading African-American abolitionists, could also foster racial and ethnic exclusivity when white women drew on Anglo-Saxonist discourse to stress the supposed common heritage of white British and American women.

An analysis of female anti-slavery as feminism thus highlights both the potential for cross-race alliance among women and the obstacles posed by racism, classism and Eurocentrism, showing how such tensions have characterised the development of modern western feminism from the very outset. It is against this background that the roots of the

'imperial feminism' identified by Antoinette Burton as developing in Britain over the 1860-1914 period can be better understood. This brought together questions of white women's rights and the position of colonised women in a way which has parallels to earlier American abolitionist- feminism: British women combined campaigning for their own rights with campaigning on behalf of Indian women and presented their imperial role as a reason to give them the vote.

Conclusion

The relationship between different emancipation movements is both a question for historians and an on-going political issue. Here I have attempted to show that the link between abolitionism and feminism in Britain needs to be placed within both a comparative transatlantic framework and an imperial context in order to be fully understood. I have suggested that the abolitionist-feminism characteristic of Garrisonian female anti-slavery in the US did not take root in Britain, and that the woman-slave analogy had rather different connotation in the two countries. I have also outlined two alternative ways of understanding the link between anti-slavery and feminism in Britain. The first sees abolitionism and feminism as largely separate movements which at times adopted conflicting approaches, as when advocates of the rights of British women stressed similarities between their own oppression and that of slaves while women abolitionists stressed their own privileges as British women. The second approach analyses female anti-slavery as feminism and in so doing seeks to highlight the ways in which 'race' and racism impacted on the development of modern western feminism from at least the 1790s onwards.

I will leave my colleagues who have researched the American movement to decide how much help my approach can be to re-evaluating the link between abolitionism and feminism in the US context. Here I just want to make one final point: I have discussed definitions of feminism here, but not definitions of abolitionism or anti-slavery. Hilary Beckles has suggested we view slave resistance as anti-slavery, thus putting abolitionism and action by slaves themselves within the same analytical frame. If we do this, what can new understandings of the diverse roots of feminism can be gleaned from an examination of the forms of resistance by women slaves and the actions of freed women after emancipation?